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GAZA-BETHLEHEM FIRST: A STATUS REPORT

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More than three weeks after the "Gaza-Bethlehem First" plan was officially announced, it remains unclear precisely what that plan is, much less whether it is being implemented. The origins of the idea lay in Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer's proposal to carry out a phased withdrawal of Israeli forces from positions in Palestinian-controlled territories ("Area A") taken during Operation "Determined Path" in return for demonstrated success by Palestinian security forces in preventing terrorist attacks against Israeli targets. Ben-Eliezer suggested that the experiment begin in Gaza, presumably because the Palestinian Authority's security infrastructure there, unlike in the West Bank, was still largely intact, and also because Israeli's ability to close off the Gaza Strip reduced the risk of incursions into Israel in case PA suppression of terrorism proved less than adequate – hence, the original term "Gaza First." However, in his discussions with Ben-Eliezer, the Palestinian Interior Minister, Gen. Abd al-Razek Yihya, insisted that the plan be simultaneously applied somewhere in the West Bank in order to avoid the impression that the political fate of Gaza was somehow being separated from that of the West Bank. Thus, "Gaza First" became "Gaza-Bethlehem First," in precisely the same way that the initial implementation phase of the 1993 Declaration of

Principles (the Oslo Agreement) was changed from "Gaza First" to "Gaza-Jericho First."

However, apart from the geography, almost everything else about Gaza-Bethlehem quickly lost whatever focus it originally had. And there was not too much specificity to begin with, largely because the domestic constraints on both sides forced the interlocutors to make do with vague understandings about confidence-building measures rather than commit themselves to formal agreements. On the Israeli side, Ben-Eliezer was obviously acting with the knowledge and approval of the Prime Minister, but Ariel Sharon was nevertheless reluctant to identify himself publicly with the idea of force pullbacks in the face of strong criticism from politicians on the right, who insisted that only the continuing presence of Israeli troops explained what seemed to be a lull in terrorist actions – there had not been a suicide bombing inside Israel since August 4. Thus, he argued that the proposed pullbacks amounted to little more than the movement of "a few tanks" here and there. Besides, having signaled his determination to undermine Yasir Arafat, he could hardly be enthusiastic about any understandings reached with Palestinians obviously acting at the direction of Arafat – which was the case with Yihye. The same reasoning explains his reluctance to endorse Foreign Minister Shimon

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Peres' approval of a meeting of the Palestinian Legislative Council for the purpose of ratifying the new Cabinet headed by Arafat.

On the Palestinian side, Yihye and other Fatah negotiators were unable to convince Hamas, Islamic Jihad or the more radical nationalist movements to commit themselves to what essentially amounted to a cease-fire with Israel. And without voluntary compliance, the PA was reluctant to launch a campaign of forceful repression, particularly since Palestinian public emotions had been inflamed by several incidents in which innocent civilians were killed by Israeli forces. As a result, the reduction of terrorism in Israel was not accompanied by a significant decrease in the level of violence in Gaza, and Israeli redeployments there were largely cosmetic. Instead of pulling forces out, Israeli just made it easier for humanitarian relief supplies to move in. Ironically, then, what began as "Gaza First" and was transformed into "Gaza-Bethlehem First" turned out to be "Bethlehem First," for only there was there a noteworthy pullback and the reintroduction of an armed Palestinian security presence. Nor is there any indication that what happened in Bethlehem will be repeated elsewhere in the West Bank in the coming days or weeks or that "Gaza-Bethlehem First" will provide the foundation for a lasting cease-fire and the restoration of mutual confidence or a springboard for renewed peace negotiations.

Despite this rather uninspiring record, however, there are several elements of the plan that do leave an opening for more positive developments. One is that it originated in low-key but direct contacts between the parties. In other words, it reflected genuine understanding by Israelis and Palestinians of their own needs and circumstances, rather than the need to respond to the urgings of outside mediators. For Israel, this primarily meant recognition that direct Israeli military control of the Palestinian population is not a viable, long-term solution and that some alternative to the post-"Determined Path" status quo needs to be elaborated. That

inevitably implies endorsement, once again, of the principle that some responsibility for Israeli security will be transferred to the Palestinians. For the Palestinians, it meant acknowledgement that further PA abnegation of this responsibility was no longer acceptable because the political price for the PA itself as well as the material and human cost for the general Palestinian population was becoming intolerable. Indeed, the vigorous Palestinian debate that has erupted since Operation "Defensive Shield" in April about the profit-and-loss calculation for the so-called *intifada* and the increasingly assertive demands by prominent personalities to change course and renounce violence may be signals of precisely the kind of fatigue that allows Yihye to discuss security understandings without demanding or expecting an immediate political *quid pro quo* from Israel. And despite the incomplete results thus far, the discussions continue.

A second potentially promising element is the implicit agreement to correct what appears to have been exposed as a defect in the Oslo Process, namely, the ambiguity about the relative importance of time-based and performance-based criteria for further movement. The "Gaza-Bethlehem Process" incorporates many of Oslo's principles – including the institutionalized link between Gaza and the West Bank, and the idea of gradualism or incrementalism – but it departs from Oslo by refraining from stipulating any timeframes or target dates. Instead, it makes Israeli transfers of territorial control and/or authority entirely contingent on PA compliance in the realm of security, or at least on incontrovertible evidence of a determined PA effort to comply.

None of this should be interpreted as proof that the pattern of Israeli-Palestinian relations established over the past two years is about to undergo a decisive shift. It does suggest, however, that some Palestinians, including those at the very highest level, are seriously reconsidering the benefits and costs of the course they have pursued over the past two years.